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Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity

Transformations, Visions, Tensions

edited by

Staf Hellemans and Jozef Wissink

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Introduction

Staf Hellemans and Jozef Wissink

It is a truism that everything is changing very fast. The Catholic Church – that self-styled champion of tradition and steadfastness – is no exception. It is not only affected and challenged by changes from the outside world. The Church itself is promoting all sorts of changes. As a result, a new Catholic Church is emerging in the West, one that is, in many respects, very different from the Church before 1960. This book aims to describe this new Church-*in-the-making* (its new frame of mind, its new position in society, its new internal functioning) and to treat some basic issues the Church has to deal with (e.g., how to imagine the Church in advanced modernity, how the Church can attract youth and adults, rebuild local communities, refashion liturgy, rethink pastoral guidance and mission). The book is the result of an interdisciplinary endeavor by philosophers, sociologists, and theologians working at the School of Catholic Theology at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, reinforced by two researchers from the Heythrop Institute at the University of London. Consequently, the book addresses the evolution and prospects of the Catholic Church in the West, above all in Western Europe.

The book has a systematic objective: to describe the crucial changes in the Church after 1960, to determine what the new shape of the Catholic Church in the West is/will be, and to suggest some proposals of how the major problems arising out of this new situation for the Catholic Church might be taken up. This is not the first time in history that the Catholic Church has been forced, due to radical changes in society, to re-invent itself. This was also the case after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic period abolished absolutism and the old unity between church and state. It took the whole first half of the 19th century to establish a new church formation. This ultramontane mass Catholicism was well, though critically, embedded in the first modernity and was in manifold ways retailored in the following decades. It collapsed in the 1960's and 1970's – we take the year 1960 as the watershed date – as a result of another wave of radical social changes, the transition to what we call 'advanced modernity' or 'late modernity'. This transition forced the Church once again into a complete overhaul. How the remake should be done was and is, however, heavily contested. At first, at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and in the years thereafter, a strategy of religious liberalism striving to forge a partnership with the modern world seemed to prevail. Afterwards, a conservative policy was launched. We want to avoid being stuck in such an ideological approach. Our aim with this book is, instead, to transcend an all too partisan view and to get an overall picture of the longer term. The remaking of the Church should not be

reduced to the execution of a plan or strategy, either well- or ill-conceived. It is far more complex, involving a myriad of initiatives, the outcome of which is, to a high degree, unintended. A broader perspective is also needed because a new church formation is not built in a couple of years, but in a time frame of many decades. Indeed, the new Church is still in the making. Yet, we also think that the remaking has, by now, progressed to an extent that the outlines of the new Church are beginning to become apparent.

Projecting the new Church

In the first chapter, sociologist Staf Hellemans attempts to flesh out the lead idea of the book: the systematic interpretation of the whirlpool of changes and conflicts in the past decades in terms of a transitional period, in which the old church formation, ultramontane mass Catholicism, is being dissolved and the making of a new church formation, choice Catholicism, has begun. The proposal of a transition to a new Church implies raising at least two questions. First, what does this new Church look like? Some basic characteristics of the new Church will thus be described: the prevalence of choice, the trend towards a minority church without enforcing power, the evolution towards a delocalized and flexible church organization, the predominance of experiential religion in an event church, the religionization of the Church and the transformation into a multicultural world church. Hellemans insists that these are characteristics that are consonant with advanced modernity, notwithstanding the alienation felt and the critique given by the Church. Second, how strong and impactful might this new Church be? Three alternative scenarios are envisaged: a strict church (sect), a liberal church (fellowship), or a major minority church. The conditions for realizing the last scenario are explored, leading to the conclusion that it will be highly difficult for the Catholic Church to remain a vigorous major church in the West.

What will be decisive is whether the Catholic Church, in presenting the religion of the Christian God, will still be perceived by many people as having relevance for living a good and fulfilled life. In the past, Christianity was highly relevant: it was woven into the very texture of society and captured both the dreams and fears of the people. Will the future Church be able to do the same? Philosopher and theologian, Anthony Carroll, SJ, inspired by Charles Taylor and continuing the programmatic line of thinking of the Vatican II constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, sets himself the task of delineating a Catholic account of and vision for advanced modernity. The project has both a retrospective and a prospective part. Against secularist views that hail Enlightenment rationality and science as the only progenitors of modernity and denounce religion as their opposite, Carroll stresses the central role of Christianity in the genesis of modernity, not only of Protestant Christianity (which is more accepted), but also of Catholicism. The intimate link between Catholicism and modernity means that the Catholic Church can be, in the contemporary world, a valuable dialogue partner.

The Church provides resources of meaning, solidarity, and hope that are in short supply in other programs of modernity, resources that can help tackle the major challenges and problems with which advanced modernity and the people living in it are confronted: personal well-being, the collective building of normative consensus, the handling of the issue of inequality, dialogue with other cultures. According to Carroll, by entering and fostering mutual learning processes, both advanced modernity and the Catholic Church have much to gain.

Adding to Carroll's proposal of a Catholic program for advanced modernity, philosopher Peter Jonkers explores the intellectual strategy that might enable the Catholic Church, now fallen back to the status of a minority church, to be valued, nevertheless, as a viable and pertinent interlocutor in the public arena. As a case in point, he analyses the ideas put forward by Pope Benedict XVI and confronts them with the secular approaches of Rawls and Habermas. According to Jonkers, Benedict follows a double line of reasoning: he acknowledges the accordance between Christianity and Enlightenment, while at the same time pointing to the incompleteness of the Enlightenment. The latter's restricted interpretation of reason precludes addressing adequately major problems like radical pluralism and scientific reductionism and may even end in a perversion of reason (as, potentially, in genetic engineering). The Church can act here as "a purifying force". On the one hand, it is attached to reason and places itself under the criticism of reason in order to avoid religious pathologies like fundamentalism. On the other hand, as a wisdom tradition geared to existential knowledge and to the promotion of the good life, it broadens reason and guards this power against reductionist rationalities as well as against pluralist evaporation. Jonkers concludes, together with Pope Benedict and in line with Carroll, that the great religions, among them (Catholic) Christianity, are relevant for advanced modernity and that they should, more particularly, be welcomed as indispensable and correcting forces in the public arena of advanced modernity.

As said in the opening lines, 'change', 'transformation', 'renewal' is everywhere present in advanced modernity, and also in the Catholic Church. The Church is not only proposing programmatic changes to the late modern world (see Carroll and Jonkers), but is also implementing internal changes. Canon lawyer Ton Meijers presents a study of how internal changes are perceived and justified by the Catholic Church. He takes religious freedom as an exemplary case. In the 19th century, several popes condemned vehemently the introduction of a civil right to religious freedom by liberal governments as a road to religious relativism and indifferentism. However, in the Second Vatican Council, specifically in the constitution *Dignitatis Humanae*, religious freedom was embraced as a fundamental human right. Since then, the popes have repeatedly reclaimed this human right for the Church against encroachments from the state or from anticlerical and anti-Christian movements. How does the Catholic Church deal with this seemingly overt discontinuity? Meijers shows that the Church reconciles its new attitude towards religious freedom with older views through a two-fold strategy: by refusing to condemn the old viewpoints and formulations and,

moreover, by inserting them in the new documents. In particular, the old prime argument for objecting to religious freedom – the moral obligation to seek the divine truth – has not been abrogated, but is being upheld in the new view as a crucial mediating link. This manner of reasoning is clearly at work in the phrasing of *Dignitatis Humanae*. A careful insertion of the old in the new can equally be detected in the new Code of 1983. Canon 748 on religious freedom thus refers not only to *Dignitatis Humanae*, but also – and verbally! – to canons of the old 1917 Code. The same procedure is again used in the new teaching on mixed marriages. Meijers calls this propensity towards harmonization of new views with old ones 'reform with continuity'. He thus makes explicit how the Catholic Church self-legitimately copes with and even invokes internal changes.

From the perception by the Church of internal changes, we next move to the changing perception by the Church of itself. Theologian and ecclesiologist Henk Witte reviews the history of the leading ecclesiological metaphors in the last two centuries. Since ecclesiological metaphors express the self-understanding of the Church, they serve as a good entrance to assess how the Church is affected by and responding to modernity. From before 1800 until 1960, the Church preferred to view and to present itself as a 'societas perfecta', as a church that had at its disposal all the means to exist self-sufficiently. The model was directed against the confinement policy of, first, the absolutist state and, later, the liberal nation states. At the same time, it expressed metaphorically the ideal of ultramontane mass Catholicism. Because the stress on the institutional and visible dimensions of the Church was felt increasingly as one-sided, it was complemented in the first half of the 20th century with the model of the mystical body of Christ. In the 1960's and 1970's, in a time that the Church was rethinking its relation with modern society in partnership terms, 'sacramentum mundi' and, above all, 'people of God' came to the fore as new leading models. Since the middle of the 1980's, with heavy insistence from the Vatican, 'communio' has taken over the lead role as the ecclesiological, self-reflective model. Though every institution likes to present itself nowadays as an informal group of like-minded people, the model also expresses the wish for church unity in a time of pluralism and potential discord and harbors, at least potentially, a Trinitarian vision of God who loves to dialogue with humankind. Witte thus gives full weight to the link between the changing position and the changing self-understanding of the Catholic Church within modernity.

In the preceding contributions, we met in advanced modernity a Catholic Church that is changing (Hellemans), programming change (Carroll and Jonkers), legitimizing change (Meijers), and reflecting change (Witte). In the chapter provided by sociologist and practical theologian James Sweeney, CP, we look at conscious projects of change, designed to bring about church renewal and revitalization. To keep the survey within manageable proportions, Sweeney focuses his history on one country, Britain. The British trajectory is similar to that of most Catholic churches in Western Europe: being a fortress church before the Council, it opened itself with great enthusiasm in the 1960's

and was forced to find a new balance afterwards. In contrast, however, to the Netherlands, the British Catholic Church did not fall prey to endless conflicts between progressives and conservatives. Consciously set-up renewal projects constitute, of course, only one particular portion of the sweeping changes that are traversing the Catholic Church. But the chronological review of these renewal attempts by Sweeney allows us to follow the post-conciliar evolution of the Church upon the heels, so to speak. It also adds some valuable conclusions. First of all, the amount and variety of the renewal attempts are immediately striking. It invalidates the generally held outsider view that the Catholic Church resists any change whatsoever and is 'only' upholding old views and structures. Second, the evolution of the renewal attempts is informative with regard to the road taken into the new church formation: the impact and the memory of the Second Vatican Council are fading and all efforts are now directed towards the revitalization of a declining Church in what is seen as a threatening environment. According to Sweeney, the post-conciliar era, taken in a strict sense, is now over and we are moving "beyond the Council" "into unchartered territory".

Ministering the new Church

The lead idea that a new Catholic Church is emerging in advanced modernity is explored further in the second part of the book. While the first part deals in more general terms with how the Catholic Church is affected by and is responding to change, the second part focuses on some important sectors of the Church: pastoral care, church development, liturgy, youth work, and mission. What can be said about the ways the new Church is and should be organizing and performing its ministry for a population that is no longer 'at home' in territorial parishes and can no longer be regarded as being church members 'from the cradle to the grave'? Looking over the chapters, two major desiderata are being raised by the authors again and again: the call to individualize and to differentiate ministry, and the need to reach out towards people at the margins of and outside the Church.

For practical theologian Stefan Gärtner, the new situation implies the need for a profound overhaul of the way pastoral care is designed and delivered. The pre-1960 model of standardization, in which all persons were treated in a more or less uniform way as a homogeneous category of 'believers' (as, for example, in funeral rites), no longer applies. In a time of individualization, the individual with his or her unique biography, living in a highly demanding 'risk society' (Beck), must be the starting point for ministry. Above, we spoke of the need for the Church to demonstrate to people that religion is the *conditio sine qua non* to allow one to live a fulfilled life and that the Church is crucially important in helping to reach this goal. In his contribution, Gärtner translates this ideal in a view on pastoral care wherein the pastor guides, case by case and within a Christian framework, the processes of identity building by the individual. Contemporary and future pastoral care should "not only connect the various frag-

ments of one's life to a coherent life story, ... but also demonstrate the role that the Gospel can play in this process". This is, for sure, no easy task. Because biographical orientation is so crucial for individuals in late modernity and because it is so difficult to give individual pastoral care – religious life guidance – it should, according to Gärtner, be given special priority in the Church.

Sociologist and theologian Kees De Groot takes up the issue of the new forms (in plural) of local church organization. Here again, the crumbling of the old standard-model, in this case, the organization of the Church locally as an all-embracing and uniform 'parish civilization', is obvious. According to De Groot, in advanced modernity – which he, following Zygmunt Bauman, prefers to call 'liquid modernity' – the Church has become a hybrid organization. Indeed, the Church nowadays organizes and provides services for different kinds of persons and target groups and it combines, in doing so, different types of organizations (mutual support groups like the parish core communities, service delivery agencies like the parish professionals for locals and the chaplains and spiritual counselors in prison, army and hospitals, campaigning bodies such as the new ecclesial movements). Being immersed in 'liquid modernity', the Church has thus become a network organization. The problem, though, is that the Church tends to continue organization styles and thought patterns that are inherited from 'solid modernity', taking mass Catholicism from before 1960 as the norm. De Groot concludes that the Church should support neither exclusively solid forms (for example, parishes) nor exclusively liquid forms (for example, new ecclesial movements), but should rather keep an open eye for all the forms in which God presents Himself in the contemporary world.

While Gärtner and De Groot emphasize the need for more differentiated pastoral care and forms of church organization, liturgist scholar Willem-Marie Speelman reminds us of a second, complicating problem when ministering to the 'individualized individuals' (Luhmann) in advanced modernity: the lack of openness on the part of the individuals. His analysis of the post-1960 liturgical and ritual celebrations leads him to conclude: "My diagnosis is that there is no real communication in advanced modernity because people are not open to transformation." To prove his point, he first goes back in history. In the Middle Ages, especially since the Gregorian Reform of the 11th century, the liturgy became more clericalized and standardized, thanks to the increasing use of (Roman) liturgical books. In the 20th century, with the rise of electronic media, the center shifted from book to practice to communication. The reform of the liturgy in the Second Vatican Council effectuated this change, yet is confronted with major problems. Indeed, communication is a two-way process. It demands a porous and vulnerable Church that is giving presence to the Presence of the Lord – this point corresponds to the de-standardizing drive in advanced modernity, mentioned above. But it also demands openness for this Presence from the side of the individuals. Individuals, however, according to Speelman, tend to remain enclosed within the walls of their 'buffered selves' (Taylor). The Church, for its part, has no other option than to offer, in a balanced communicative approach, the Real Presence of the Lord, in the hope that a transformative relation with the participants becomes established.

In addressing the difficult question of whether and how today's generation of young people and the Catholic Church might meet in advanced modernity, sociologist Monique Van Dijk-Groeneboer takes up the same issue as the one raised by Speelman, but this time in a non-theological way: how to reach and open up people. Building on surveys she conducted, she distinguishes four groups amongst today's youth: church committed 'fortissimo's', church festive 'legato's', religion seeking but church alienated 'spirituoso's', and non-interested 'tranquillo's'. By way of conclusion of this first part and referring to the 'legato's' and 'spirituoso's', she rejects the idea that contemporary youth is no longer open to religion. She then turns to the Catholic Church. In its declarations, the Church still places great value in church commitment by young people. Consequently, it spends a lot of effort on reaching youths. Next, taking the Netherlands as an example, Van Dijk-Groeneboer reviews the concrete ways in which the Church tries to mobilize today's youth. It appears that a great many initiatives are taken: on the national level (e.g., Dutch Catholic Youth Day), on the diocesan level (e.g., gatherings in the lead up to confirmation), and on the parish level (especially youth choirs). However, nearly all mobilizing initiatives are directed towards the 'fortissimo's'. Van Dijk-Groeneboer thus ends her contribution with a plea for putting more energy in addressing the other three categories of young people.

The last chapter of the book, provided by practical theologian Jozef Wissink, continues to analyze head on, from a theological viewpoint, the second great desideratum: the need to reach out to people other than the core members of the Church. Its overriding importance is nowadays acknowledged by the Church itself and treated under the term 'mission'. Before 1960, mission was understood as the evangelization of the Third World or as the preaching of mission retreats in the parishes in the West. After 1960, it took on a new meaning, pointing to the 'new evangelization' the Catholic Church is calling for in times of secularization. The theological groundwork had already been laid at the Second Vatican Council. The need for mission was afterwards highlighted by papal encyclicals like *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990). On the ground, many initiatives – at many levels (parish as well as diocesan), by religious congregations as well as by new ecclesial movements – have been undertaken. Wissink develops a scheme to systematize the bewildering array of activities and pleads for a dialogical missionary attitude that avoids the pitfalls of both indoctrination and mere listening. It is clear that the Catholic Church as well as theological and missiological thinking are only at the beginning of what appears to be an enormous and crucial undertaking. Indeed, if the Catholic Church wants to remain a major church, it will have to stabilize its membership and audience by attracting a substantial portion of outsiders.

Convergences and divergences

In order to draw some lines of convergence and divergence among the contributions, it seems useful to start from the distinction between the three possible future scenarios that was made in the chapter by Hellemans. The first possibility mentioned is that of the Catholic Church becoming a sect. The meaning of 'sect' is determined by three characteristics: a) small in number, b) highly demanding, and c) having a marginal position in society. A sect is a subculture, a counter-culture. The second possibility is that the Church could also evolve into an equally small, yet liberal fellowship, going along with the dominant culture. In the third scenario, the Church would also become a minority, yet remain vigorous and recognized by many people as an important voice and resource. In short, in this last form, the Church will still have a substantial membership and a tangible societal influence.

The other authors react to this picture from the perspective of their own disciplines and from their theological standpoints. In their articles, one can discern a theological evaluation of the three scenarios: the third scenario is clearly wished for by everyone, while the first and the second are not really taken into account. Dreams of a revival of mass Catholicism are nowhere stated, probably because none of the authors believes that it is still feasible. In any case, we have seen no tendencies towards nostalgia in any of the authors. Perhaps the painful experience that ecclesiastical power is as liable to abuse as political or economic power has made our hopes for the Church more modest. We seem to feel at home in the checks and balances that are associated with the position of a minority church in advanced modernity. But if we have to be a minority church, then we hope that it will be a vital church that is open to the questions of the people and of our culture.

Another remarkable convergence is that the contributions from the Netherlands and Great Britain are breathing the same air. The cultural setting has great likeness and also the position of the Catholic Church in society is about the same. It is true that there has been less polarization and less controversial appointments of bishops in Britain, but for the rest, the resemblances are striking. Furthermore, the resemblances seem, with time, to grow rather than to diminish.

The attitude towards our modern culture is differently appreciated by the authors, but none seems to reject our advanced-modern culture completely, nor is there an overall optimism about it. Some authors stress with greater emphasis the positive side of advanced modernity. Anthony Carroll, for instance, enumerates some points where the Church should be learning from our culture. Kees de Groot pleads against a one-sided option for old and trusted 'solid' forms of church organization. Other authors emphasize or treat more negative aspects of modernity, developments that block the receptivity of religion. Speelman interprets post-modern individuals as "buffered selves" and advises the Church to offer them "her real presence" – and through it – the Presence of the Lord in the moments when a buffered self falls apart and the person appears in his/her vulnerability and finiteness. In the setting of pastoral care, Gärtner gives more or less the same advice. Jonkers shows how Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict is critical towards scientific positivism or ironic relativism, while at the same time seeking dialogue with other strands of modern thinking in order to make the claim plausible that faith is not unreasonable. The other authors do not show a preference with regard to the pros or the cons: they keep each other in balance.

Some issues for further research

The first question is about the theological evaluation of the three possible outcomes. In theology, the word 'sect' carries mostly negative associations. The Church has a universal mission: it reaches out for all people, all nations, all cultures, and all religious mentalities. When, in the 4th and 5th centuries, the Donatists wanted to close the Church for ordinary sinners, Saint Augustine kept the gates open for them. He stated that we should bear and tolerate one another and let the ill weeds grow up together with the wheat. Being small can never be a goal for the Catholic Church. On the other hand, the Church should avoid becoming salt without taste. One could think of a culture so hostile towards the Gospel that making accommodations would imply succumbing to this culture. Indeed, there are times that the heart of faith is in danger. In these times, the Church should not give in. In Israel, this occurred in the time of Ezra and, again, in the time of the Maccabees. For Christianity, one can mention the times of persecution, e.g., under Nero, Hitler, and Stalin. Thus, we should not demonize the concept of 'sect', but we should articulate why our time and our culture should not be interpreted as so bad as to believe we have no option other than the sectarian one. Possibly, the debate on the evolution of the Catholic Church in this direction is more a question of how one evaluates our culture theologically than of internal dogmatic differences. In any event, also from a dogmatic perspective, further reflection is necessary.

The concept of Church as fellowship should not be demonized straight away either. It is true that the Church is not a debating club; it is a dialogical community. This means that intellectual openness and honesty to take all questions seriously should be fostered. And, because the Church is or should be a community of love, the frankness of the brothers and sisters should be present. These are all values that we associate with the image of fellowship. These are also the strong points of liberalism. However, the weak point of liberalism is that it often lacks a sense of mystery and is sometimes prepared to sacrifice the heart of religion to the logic of reason or to the trends of a culture. We should be more critical than liberals, not less.

The point we want to make, therefore, is that our evaluation of the three scenarios, of the different outcomes of the transformation process in which the Church is involved, depends on our theological evaluation of our culture. This means that practical theology is in great need of developing a theological hermeneutics of our culture. Connected with this is the question of the role of pro-

gressives and conservatives in a vital minority Church. We should not identify the appeal for change in the Church with the influence of liberals and progressives. Conservatives also change the Church, though this is mostly hidden from their own eyes. In the 19th century, for example, the conservative neo-Thomist theologians were more active in changing Catholicism into a mass movement than their liberal counterparts. We think that for the development of a vital minority Church, the most important factors are not those that oppose conservatives and progressives, but factors like spirituality, being energetic and inspiring, transparency of governance, etc. Further reflection on this point is also needed, both for progressives and for conservatives.

Part I

Projecting the New Church